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ABSTRACT

Although teenage pregnancy among Hispanics has reached alarming levels, researchers generally have not separated this population out for separate analysis. The data are incomplete, but this report is an attempt to address the need for specific information about Hispanic teenage pregnancy and parenthood by subgroup and state. Data are presented from the National Center for Health Statistics and the Bureau of the Census. The major findings are the following: (1) the rate of teenage pregnancy among Hispanics is substantially above that of the White non-Hispanic population; (2) comparisons of Hispanic subgroups show that Cuban teenagers have lower birth rates than Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans; (3) Hispanic teenagers are more likely to be married when their babies are born than are Black teenagers; (4) many Hispanic teenagers receive prenatal care after the first trimester; (5) their rate of low birth-weight babies was about the same as for Whites and lower than that for Blacks; (6) Hispanic teenage mothers are less likely to have completed high school than other teenage mothers; and (7) more research needs to be done on this problem so that the proper policies and programs can be implemented. (VM)

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HISPANIC TEENAGE PREGNANCY: OVERVIEW AND IMPLICATIONS

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HISPANIC TEENAGE PREGNANCY: OVERVIEW AND IMPLICATIONS

I. SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

Although teenage pregnancy among Hispanics has reached alarming levels, it has received very little national attention. Most recent studies have focused primarily on the impact of early childbirth on the White and Black communities. Most national data are presented for Whites, Blacks, and "Other" races, with Hispanics included in these groups rather than categorized separately. Even where data on Hispanics are provided, subgroup information is almost always unavailable. No past study has analyzed separate data on Hispanic adolescent parenthood by subgroup, even though it is understood that the groups differ considerably in the socioeconomic characteristics believed to be related to teenage pregnancy. This overview, although based on incomplete data, begins to address the need for specific information about Hispanic teenage pregnancy and parenthood by subgroup and state.

Available data indicate that the rate of teenage pregnancy among Hispanics is substantially above that of the White non-Hispanic population. While birth rates vary widely among the various Hispanic subgroups, Mexican American and Puerto Rican teenage females aged 15-19 consistently have higher birth rates than Cubans.

Hispanic teenage mothers are far more likely to be married when their babies are born than Blacks, but somewhat less likely to be married than Whites. However, the differences by subgroup are very great; in 1980, only a little more than one-quarter of Puerto Rican teenage mothers were married, compared to more than three-fifths of Mexican Americans and nearly three-fourths of Cubans.

A higher proportion of Hispanic teenage mothers than non-Hispanics begin receiving prenatal care after the first trimester or receive no prenatal care at all. In 1984, Puerto Rican teenage mothers were twice as likely as Mexican Americans and three times as likely as Blacks to receive no prenatal care. There were major differences by state.

The incidence of low birth-weight babies among Hispanics in 1984 was about the same as that for White non-Hispanics and much lower than that for Blacks. However, Puerto Rican babies were much more likely than other Hispanic babies to be of low birth-weight, and in some states Puerto Ricans had higher rates of low birth-weight babies than Blacks. This may be related to the lack of prenatal care received by Puerto Ricans, especially in New York.

Pregnancy is one of the major reasons cited by teenage females for dropping out of school; Hispanic teenage mothers are considerably less likely to have completed high school than White non-Hispanic or Black mothers. High school completion rates are far lower for Mexican American and Puerto Rican teenage mothers than for Cubans.

Teenage pregnancy among Hispanics is a national problem with negative social and economic consequences affecting the whole of American society. Much more information is needed about the precise nature and extent of the problem and the socioeconomic and health factors related to it, so that appropriate policies and programs can be put in place to address it.

This National Council of La Raza report on Hispanic teenage pregnancy is

an initial attempt to provide basic data analysis from unpublished national and state data on Hispanics and various Hispanic subgroups. Although this report is only a preliminary analysis of limited available information, its findings clearly demonstrate the magnitude and complexity of the problem of teenage pregnancy and parenthood in the Hispanic community.

II. STUDY SOURCES AND METHODS

Most of the data used to compile this report were obtained from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) and the Bureau of the Census. The largely unpublished NCHS data provide information on Hispanic teenage births, marital status, prenatal care, and incidence of low birth-weight babies for teenage females aged 15-19 from 22 reporting states. Nine states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, and Texas) accounting for 96.1% of Hispanic teenage births in 1980 were selected for use in the state data comparisons included in this report. The Census data provided comparative information on the total population aged 15-19 by race and Hispanic subgroup.

The data presented represent initial analyses reflecting some estimations and manipulations which make many of the figures approximations rather than exact statistics. For example, birth data were provided for White non-Hispanics, but 1980 Census data on the White population included the 55.0% of Hispanics who self-identified as White, according to the Bureau of the Census. To obtain an approximation of the number of births to White non-Hispanic teenage mothers, the 55% of Hispanics classified as White were subtracted from the White total.

Since a major purpose of the analysis was to determine comparative teenage birth rates, these rates were expressed as the percentage of the total female population aged 15-19 in each population group who had babies in a single year (1980).

The data on the incidence of low birth-weight babies included information on teenage mothers aged 15-19 and separate information for mothers aged 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19.

The data on births are provided for 1980, since that is the most recent year for which both total population data (from the Census) and data on births (from NCHS) were available, not only nationally but also by state. The tables on educational attainment and incidence of low birth-weight babies are based on 1982 and 1984 data. More recent national data on income and poverty are cited in the concluding section of the report. Thus the data provide "snapshots" of various aspects of teenage pregnancy during recent, but different, years. Finally, only limited data are provided on Central and South Americans.

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III. HISPANIC TEENAGE PREGNANCY

A. Birth Rates - 1980

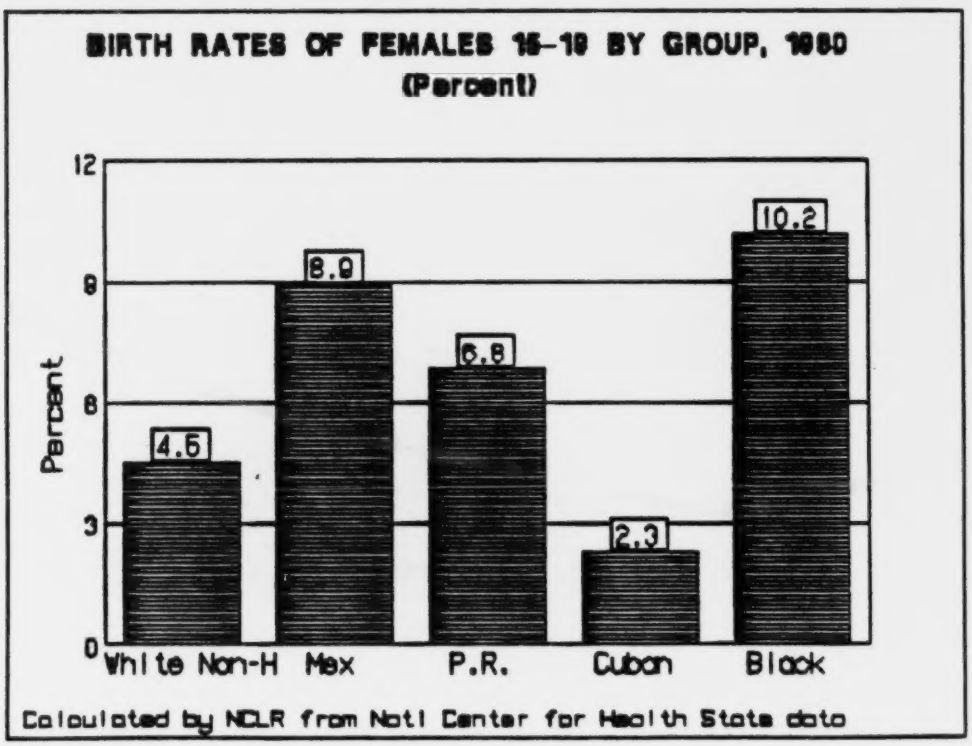
1. National Rates

The rate of teenage pregnancy and parenthood among Hispanics is substantially above that of the White non-Hispanic population. The Hispanic birth rate for females aged 15 through 19 in 1980 was 7.3%, compared with 4.5% for Whites and 10.2% for Blacks.

2. Hispanic Subgroup Comparisons

Birth rates among the various Hispanic subgroups vary widely, but Mexican American and Puerto Rican teenage females consistently have the highest rates and Cuban teenage females the lowest. In 1980, the Mexican American teenage birth rate (8.9%) was higher than for any other Hispanic group but was lower than for Blacks (10.2%) (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

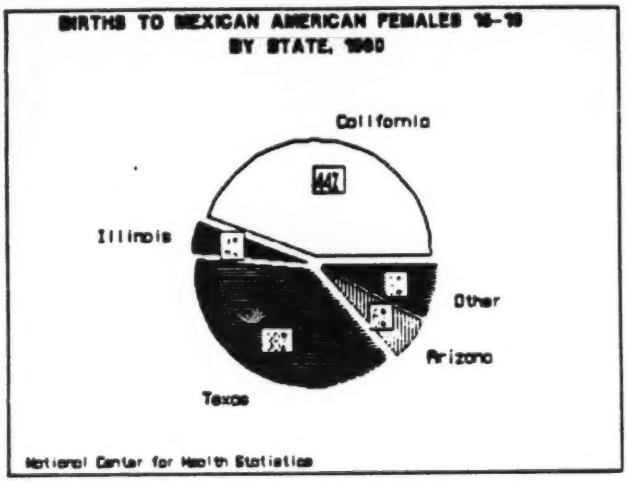


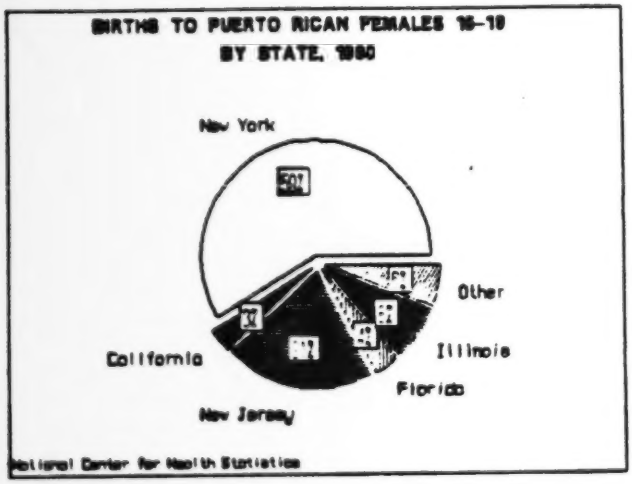
3. State Data

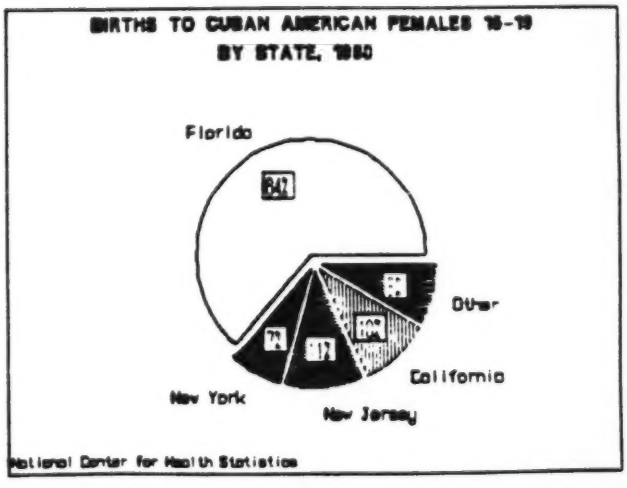
In 1980, Hispanic teenage births in the 22 reporting states were concentrated in a small number of states, reflecting the geographic concentration of Hispanics. Nine states -- California, Texas, New York, Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey, New Mexico, Colorado, and Florida -- accounted

for 96.1% of Hispanic teenage births in these 22 states. In 1980, 93.3% of Mexican American teenage births were to residents of California, Texas, Arizona, and Illinois (listed in descending order of number of Mexican American births). Five states accounted for 93.0% of Puerto Rican teenage births (New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Florida, and California), and four states accounted for 91.9% of Cuban teenage births (Florida, New Jersey, California, and New York) (See Figure 2, attached).

FIGURE 2
BIRTHS TO HISPANIC FEMALES BY SUBGROUP AND STATE, 1980



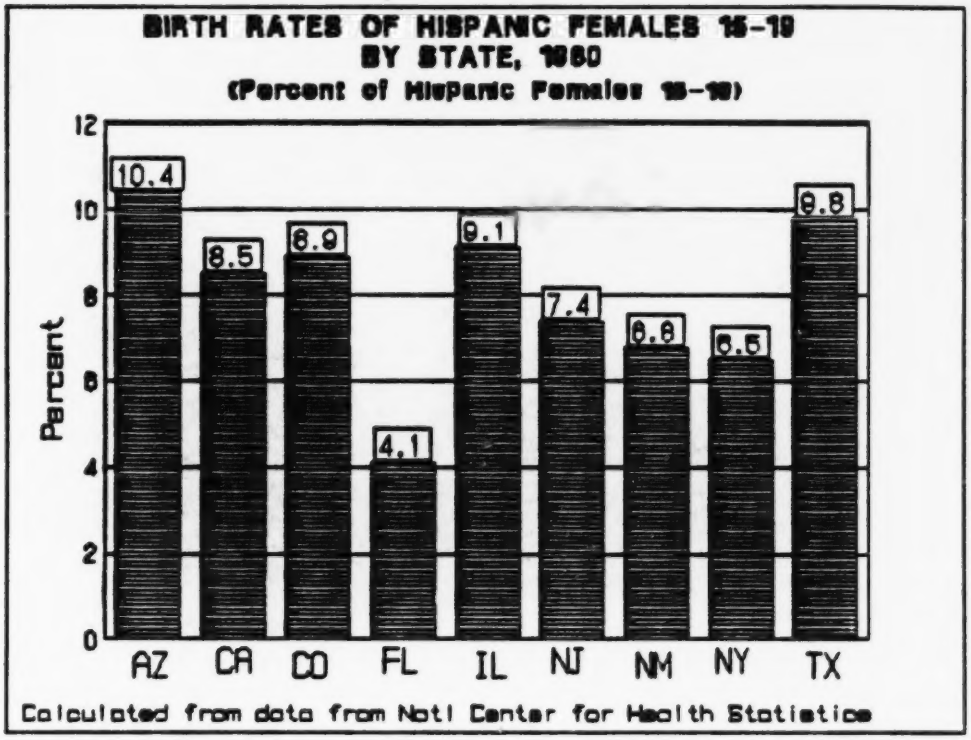




Data on the birth rates of Hispanic teenage females aged 15-19 in the nine states reflected the national data. Except in Florida, birth rates among teenage Hispanic females were higher than for the White non-Hispanic population. In most states, the Black teenage birth rate was higher than the

Hispanic rate, but in New Jersey, the Hispanic rate was higher; the Puerto Rican teenage birth rate in New Jersey was 11.6%, compared to 10.0% for Blacks. By contrast, the White non-Hispanic teenage birth rate in New Jersey (2.2%) was the lowest among the nine states. Hispanic birth rates by state are shown in Figure 3, attached.

FIGURE 3



B. Marital Status - 1980

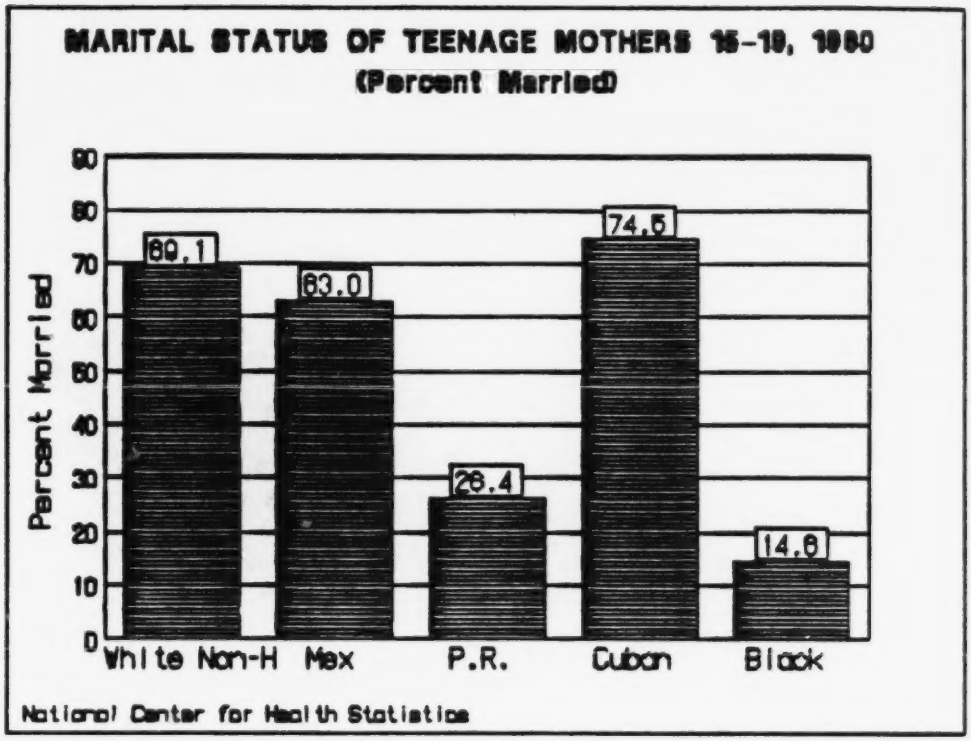
1. National Rates

While a large minority of teenage mothers are unmarried when their children are born, Hispanic teenage mothers are far more likely to be married than Blacks and slightly less likely than Whites. In 1980, 69.1% of White teenage mothers aged 15-19 were married, compared to 58.0% of Hispanics and just 14.6% of Blacks.

2. Hispanic Subgroup Comparisons

Very large differences exist among Hispanic subgroups in the percentage of teenage mothers who are married. Just 26.4% of Puerto Rican teenage mothers were married in 1980, compared to 63.0% of Mexican Americans and 74.5% of Cubans (See Figure 4).

FIGURE 4



3. State Data

Marital status of teenage mothers by state was consistent with the national data. In 1980, in eight of the nine states (all except Arizona), at least 50% of Mexican American teenage mothers were married when their child was born. In most states, the proportion of Mexican American teenage mothers who were married at childbirth approximated the proportion found in the White non-Hispanic population.

The national differences in marital status between Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans were reflected in the state data. In Texas, for example, over three-fourths of Mexican American teenage mothers were married; in New York just over one-quarter of Puerto Rican teenage mothers were married. Although in Illinois the teenage birth rates for Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans were similar, Mexican Americans were much more likely (67.0%) than Puerto Ricans (37.3%) to be married.

Throughout all the nine states, Black teenage mothers were much less likely to be married than any other population group. In Illinois, for example, Black teenage mothers were three times as likely to be unmarried as Mexican Americans and about one-and-half times as likely as Puerto Ricans.

C. Prenatal Care - 1984

1. National Data

Pregnant Hispanic teenagers in 1984 were likely to begin prenatal care at a later stage of pregnancy than non-Hispanics, and were also more likely to receive no prenatal care at all. Figures for the first trimester were very similar for Hispanics and Blacks; more than 50% of each group (52.5% of Hispanics and 52.4% of Blacks) received no prenatal care during the critical first trimester. In 1984, 7.1% of Hispanic teenage mothers received no prenatal care at all, compared to 3.0% of White non-Hispanics, and 4.3% of Blacks.

2. Hispanic Subgroup Comparisons

There are major subgroup differences in the receipt of prenatal care. In 1984, Cuban patterns of prenatal care were very similar to those of White non-Hispanic teenage mothers, while Puerto Ricans were slightly less likely to receive no early prenatal care and far more likely to receive no prenatal care than any other Hispanic or non-Hispanic population. Puerto Rican mothers were nearly twice as likely as Mexican Americans and nearly three times as likely as Blacks to receive no prenatal care (See Figures 5 and 6).

3. State Data

There are major differences in receipt of prenatal care by state (See Figure 7). While 7.1% of Hispanic teenage mothers nationally received no prenatal care at all in 1984, the percentage was 17.5% for Hispanics in New York and 10.3% for Hispanics in Texas. On the other hand, pregnant Hispanic teenagers in New Jersey, Colorado, Illinois, and California were unlikely to go without prenatal care; less than 3.5% received no prenatal care during their pregnancy.

Pregnant Hispanic teenagers of every subgroup reported were least likely to receive any prenatal care if they lived in New York. Percentages receiving no prenatal care in New York were 19.1% of Puerto Ricans, 18.9% of Mexican Americans, and 14.1% of Central and South Americans (no data were available for Cubans). Blacks (12.3%) and Whites (8.0%) were also most likely to receive prenatal care if they lived in New York.

In other states, there were major differences by subgroup. Overall, 8.1% of pregnant teenage Hispanics received no prenatal care in New Mexico, but the figure was 17.2% for Mexican Americans. (Many Hispanics in New Mexico self-identify as "Other Hispanics"; they include individuals whose families have lived in New Mexico for many generations.) Mexican Americans in Florida were especially unlikely to receive prenatal care; 10.5% received no prenatal care at all, compared to 7.7% of Puerto Ricans, 7.6% of Central and South Americans, and just 3.3% of Cubans. This may reflect the fact that a high proportion of Mexican Americans in Florida are farmworkers.

Similar state differences are found in the extent to which prenatal care is received during the first trimester. Nationally, 52.5% of Hispanic teenagers in 1984 received no prenatal care during the first three months of their pregnancy; they were most likely not to receive early prenatal care in New York

FIGURE 5

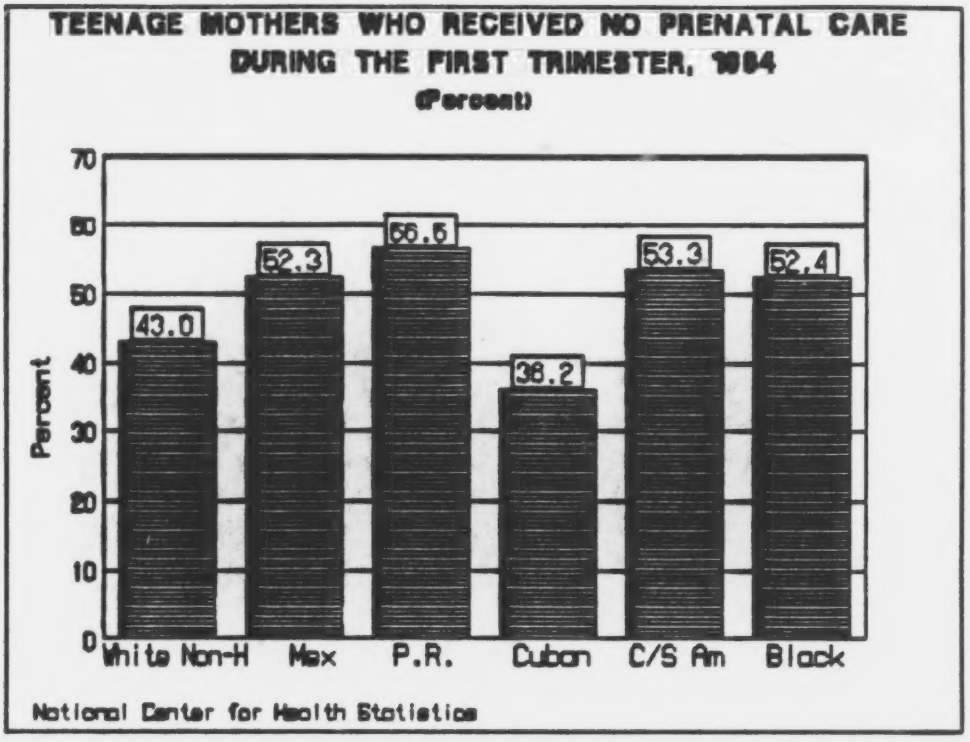
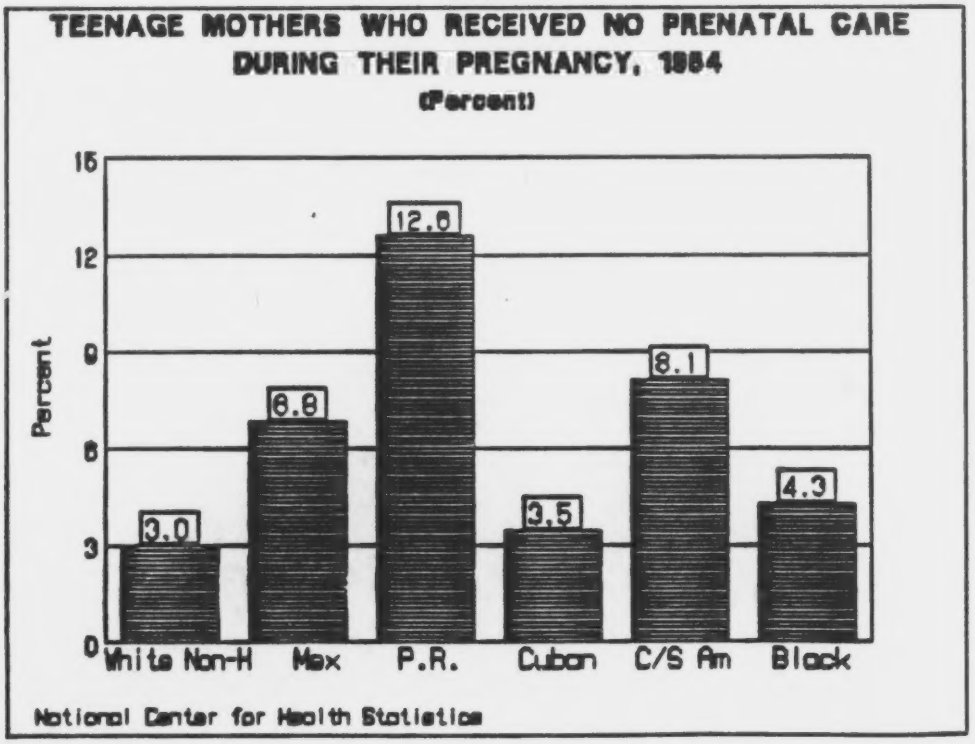
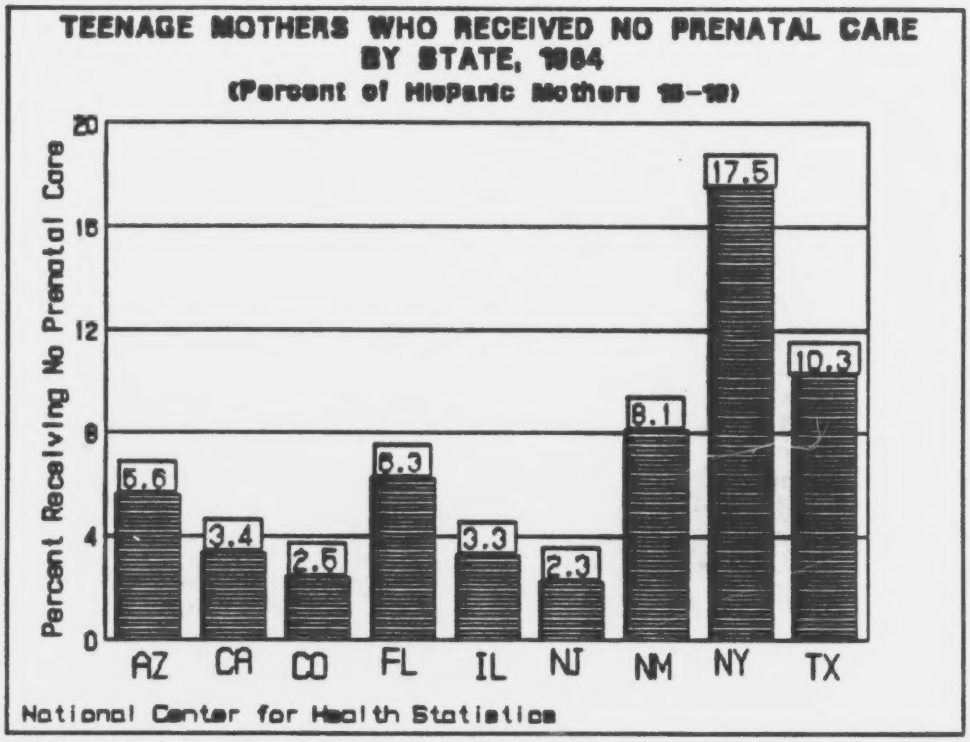


FIGURE 6



(65.9%), New Mexico (63.2%), and Texas (59.0%). Early prenatal care rates were poorest in New York for Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Central and South Americans. Early care was most likely to be provided in New Jersey, California, and Illinois.

FIGURE 7



D. Low Birth Weight - 1984

1. National Rates

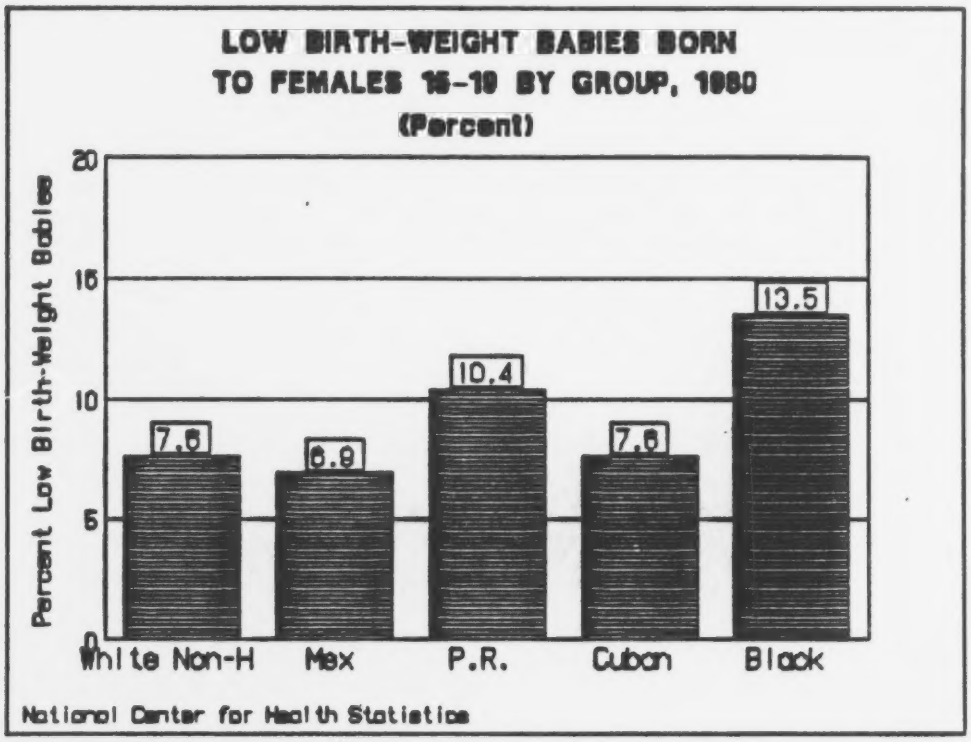
Low birth weight is defined as weight of less than 2,500 grams (five pounds and eight ounces). Low birth-weight babies are 20 times more likely to die in the first year of life than normal birth-weight babies. They are also at greater risk of handicapping conditions.

For teenage mothers aged 15-19, the incidence of low birth-weight babies born to Hispanics (7.5%) in 1984 was about the same as that for White non-Hispanics (7.6%). Blacks were almost twice as likely to have low birth-weight babies (13.1%). The differences among groups were similar regardless of the age of the teenage mother. However, younger Hispanic and White mothers -- particularly those 15 and 16 years of age -- were somewhat more likely than older teenagers to have low birth-weight babies. Differences by age were smaller for Blacks.

2. Hispanic Subgroup Comparisons

Among the Hispanic subgroups, Puerto Ricans were by far the most likely to have low birth-weight babies; 10.4% were low birth-weight in 1984. The percentage of low birth-weight babies among Mexican American teenage mothers was relatively low; in 1984, 6.9% of babies born to Mexican Americans were of low birth-weight, compared to 7.6% of babies born to Cubans (See Figure 8).

FIGURE 8



3. State Data

Differences across states in percentage of low birth-weight Hispanic babies were generally small. The highest rate was found in New York, where Hispanics were also least likely to receive early prenatal care and most likely to receive no prenatal care. The lowest rate was found in California.

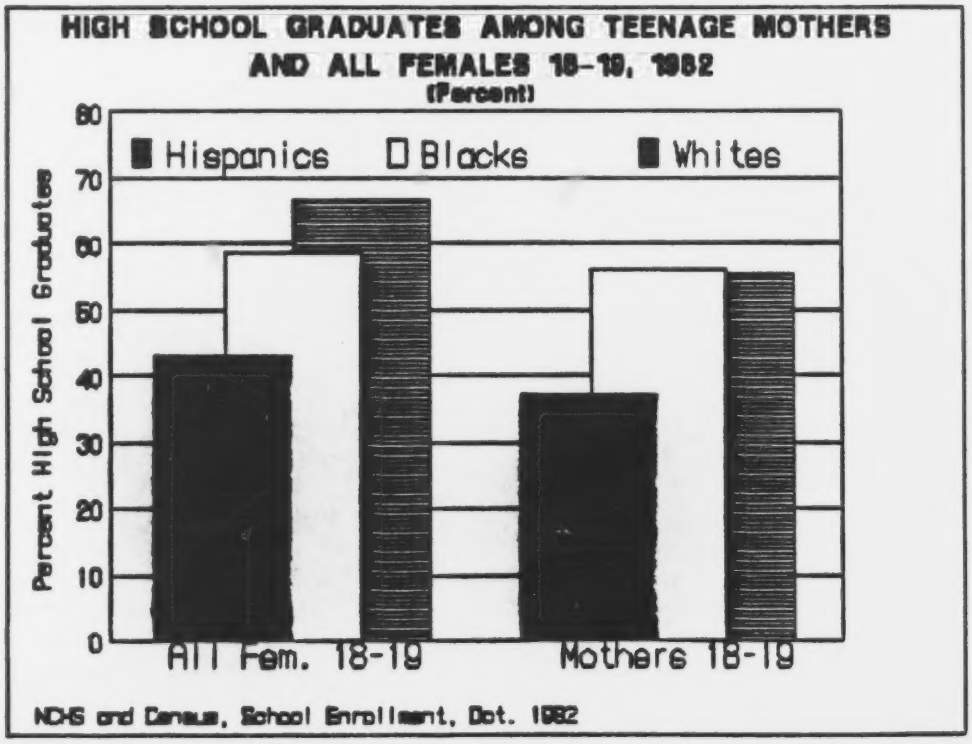
In all states, Puerto Ricans had the highest incidence of low birth-weight babies; in New Jersey, Puerto Rican teenage mothers were more likely than Blacks to have low birth-weight babies. Mexican Americans typically were less likely than White non-Hispanics to have low birth-weight babies, except in Florida. Mexican Americans had a higher incidence of low birth-weight babies in Florida than in any other state, which may reflect the fact that many are from low-income farmworker families. Mexican American teenage mothers were least likely to have low birth-weight babies in Illinois. Central and South Americans in Texas had a higher incidence of low birth-weight babies than those in the other reporting states.

E. Educational Attainment - 1982

Hispanic teenage mothers are considerably less likely to have completed high school than White non-Hispanic and Black teenage mothers. In 1982, only 26.0% of Hispanic teenage mothers aged 15-19 had completed high school compared with 40.7% of White non-Hispanic and 35.5% of Black teenage mothers. However, no data are available on what percentage of teenage mothers are still enrolled in school, so it is difficult to project eventual school completion rates for these young mothers.

Data on the educational attainment of Hispanic teenage females 18-19 also suggest that early childbearing has a serious negative effect on the educational status of Hispanic women. In 1982, only about 31% of Mexican American and Puerto Rican teenage mothers aged 18-19 were high school graduates; overall, 37.3% of Hispanic teenage mothers had completed high school. That same year, 43.2% of all Hispanic females had completed high school, and many more were still enrolled (See Figure 9).

FIGURE 9



The 1982 data indicate that Cuban teenage mothers were the only Hispanic subgroup whose educational attainment was generally comparable to that of White non-Hispanic teenage mothers; nearly half of those aged 18-19 were high school graduates. Central and South Americans had the second highest rate of high school completion. Figures 10 and 11 show high school completion rates for all teenage mothers 15-19 and for 18-19 year-olds.

FIGURE 10

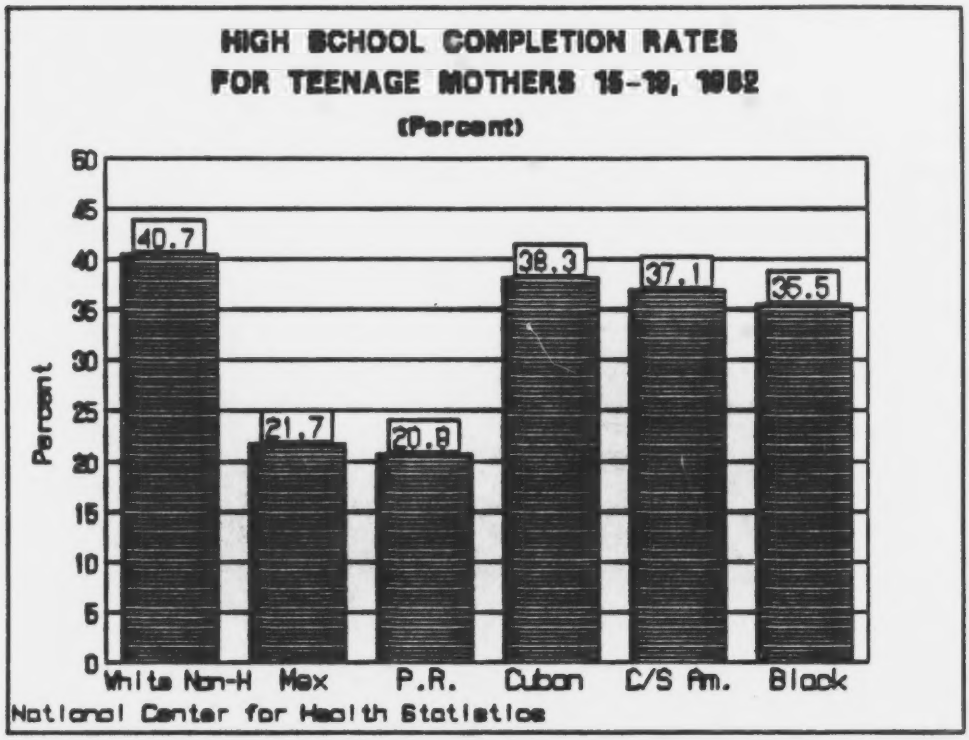
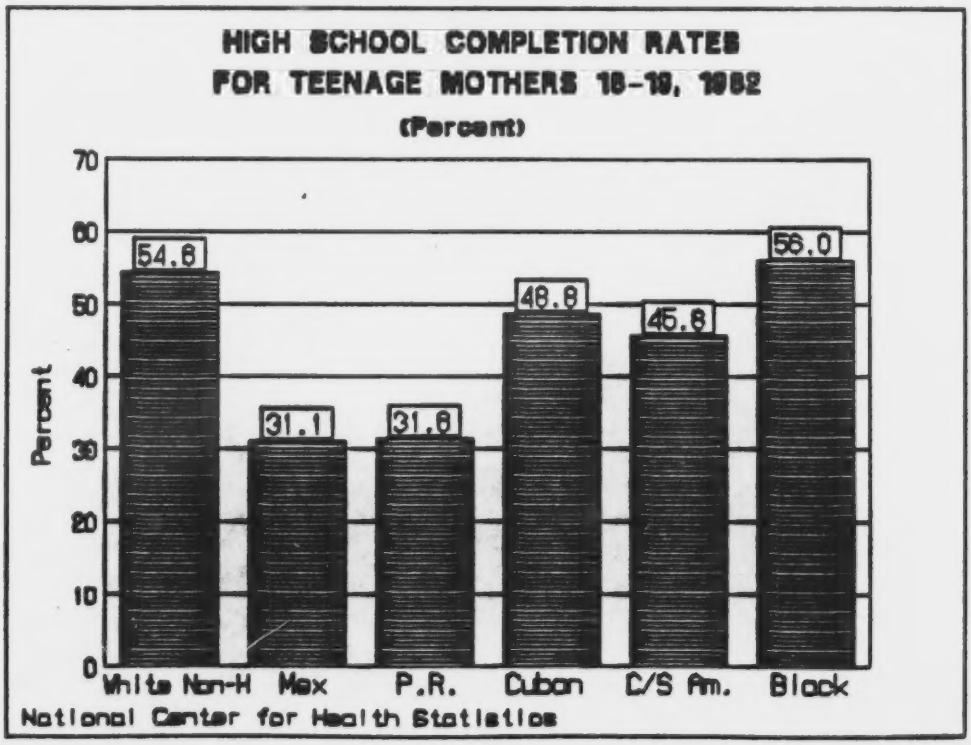


FIGURE 11



Pregnancy is one of the major reasons cited by teenage females for dropping out of school. In 1980, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that the two major reasons reported by sophomore dropouts for leaving high school before graduation were: "I got married or planned to get married" (31.0%) and "pregnancy" (23.0%). No information is available on the extent to which the females who cited marriage as a reason for leaving school might have been pregnant or intended to become pregnant.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

A. Societal Implications of Hispanic Teenage Pregnancy

Adolescent childbearing among all ethnic groups is often associated with devastating social and economic consequences likely to affect the whole of American society. However, high birth rates alone cannot be considered a social problem unless adolescent childbearing becomes a major determinant of low educational attainment, low-income female heads of households, and poverty within a particular population group. Regardless of ethnic group, teenagers who marry and become parents after graduating from high school, and whose households include one or more members who become stable members of the work force, should not be considered a social problem. Traditionally, Hispanics have married younger than other Americans. In 1985, more than one-fourth of Hispanic females 15-19 were or had been married, but most were marrying older men; only 6.5% of Hispanic teenage males were or had been married. The relatively high teenage birth rates among Hispanics must therefore be looked at in the context of the socioeconomic status of the families involved.

Although both Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans have high teenage birth rates, the majority of Mexican American teenage mothers, unlike Puerto Ricans, are married when their child is born. In 1980, in Texas (the state with the second largest concentration of Mexican Americans), the Mexican American teenage birth rate (10.5%) was one of the highest among the Hispanic subgroups. However, over 75% of Mexican American teenage mothers in Texas were married at childbirth. By contrast, in New York (the state with the highest concentration of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland), only a little more than a quarter of Puerto Rican teenage mothers were married. Other important data for these teenage parents, such as high school completion rates and employment status of the head of household, are not known. However, it is clear that, regardless of subgroup, society has reason to be concerned about teenage pregnancy when it is accompanied by such results as one or both parents leaving school without high school completion, unemployment, poverty, and welfare dependency.

To understand the implications of teenage pregnancy when it is associated with these actions, it is useful to consider the following facts:

The major predictor of poverty among Hispanic families is having a female head of household; 53.1% of Hispanic and 50.5% of Black female-headed households were poor in 1985, compared to 17.0% of Hispanic and 12.2% of Black married-couple families.

If teenage mothers are not marrying -- or if they marry and then soon separate or divorce -- then they are likely to become lov-income female heads of households; 74.4% of Puerto Rican families headed by females in 1984 lived below the poverty level, as did 43.8% of female-headed Mexican American families. The 1985 median family income for female-headed Hispanic families was just 39% of the median income for married-couple families. Perhaps the most alarming statistic deals with the children in such families: in 1985, three-quarters of Hispanic children in female-headed households were poor.

The likelihood of poverty increases greatly if the female head of household is young. In 1985, more than two-thirds of Hispanic and White female heads of household aged 15-24 were poor, as were nearly seven of eight Black female householders in that age group. The poverty rate decreased to 42.9% for Whites, 50.0% for Hispanics, and 64.5% for Blacks aged 25-34.

Puerto Rican families are more likely to be female-headed than other Hispanic families, although rates are increasing for all groups. In 1985, 44.0% of Puerto Rican families were headed by females, compared to 18.6% of Mexican American families. The higher numbers of Puerto Rican females who are both young teenage mothers and heads of households exacerbate the conditions of poverty among Puerto Ricans. The consequences of premarital childbearing among Puerto Ricans have helped to place them in a lover social and economic status than other Hispanic groups. In 1985, Puerto Ricans had the lovest family income among Hispanics, and the highest poverty and unemployment rates.

The more favorable marital status among Mexican American teenage mothers Americans compared to Puerto Ricans, however, does not preclude social and economic disadvantages. For example, Hispanics have the lovest educational attainment of any major U.S. population group, and since teenagers who have babies are extremely likely to drop out before completing high school, teenage pregnancy regardless of marital status represents a major barrier to improving educational attainment.

Equally important are factors related to the overall job market. During the past decade, the earnings of young men have substantially declined. About one-quarter of Hispanic youth are unemployed, and changes in the job market are making it very difficult for those with a high school diploma -- let alone dropouts -- to earn enough to keep their families out of poverty. Between 1973 and 1984, the average real (inflation-adjusted) annual earnings among males ages 20-24 fell by nearly 30 percent (from $11,572 to $8,072 in 1984 dollars). The continuing shift of jobs in the U.S economy from goods-producing to service sectors has reduced the ability of young men to secure full-time year-round employment. Both young males and females have been less able to obtain and secure jobs in the manufacturing sector, which has traditionally provided the primary source of better-paying jobs for young adults, and particularly for those with less than a college education.

As a consequence, reduced earnings among young men of all population groups increase the likelihood that young families, whether headed by a married couple or a single parent, will live in poverty. For Hispanics, this socioeconomic phenomenon is compounded by the lover median family income among Hispanic married-couple households; in 1985, they received 91% of Black family income and 71% of White family income. This reflects both the relatively lov

labor force participation rate of Hispanic women -- only half of whom are in the work force -- and the fact that both Hispanic male and female workers have lower median weekly earnings than Black or White workers of the same sex. These data make it clear that all Hispanic families face major challenges in obtaining the financial resources needed to provide for their children -- and that young parents face particular obstacles.

Another important consideration in understanding Hispanic teenage pregnancy and parenthood is the relative importance of subgroup differences versus geographic impacts. Puerto Ricans, like a great majority of Blacks, are concentrated in Northeastern urban areas, while Mexican Americans are concentrated in California and the Southwest and remain somewhat less concentrated in the central cities of major metropolitan areas. Thus the similarities in rates of teenage births, low birth-weight babies, receipt of prenatal care, and marital status between Puerto Ricans and Blacks may be geographically- or environmentally-based. Perhaps these similarities are a consequence of the "ghettoization" of these two groups in large Northeastern cities.

Similarly, there may be important differences in Hispanic populations by state or important differences in services and resources available to pregnant and parenting teenagers. For example, early prenatal care rates were poorest in New York for teenagers of all population groups, including Whites; this implies inadequacies in the health care system. The rate of low birth-weight babies among Mexican American teenage mothers was highest in Florida, and Mexican Americans in this state also had one of the highest rates of no prenatal care. This may reflect a combination of service issues and the high proportion of Florida Mexican Americans who are migrant and seasonal farmworkers, traditionally one of the lowest-income segments of the Hispanic community and a group which often receives inadequate public services. In order to understand and address the problems related to teenage pregnancy, these interrelated factors must be better understood.

B. Unanswered Questions

In order to determine the community and societal consequences of teenage pregnancy among Hispanics overall and within specific subgroups and states, it will be necessary to be able to answer many important questions, such as the following:

Of those Hispanic teenage mothers who were married when their child was born, what proportion married after conception, and what are the implications of such marriages? For example, what are the divorce rates among couples who marry and have children as teenagers, and are they higher than for older Hispanic couples?

What is the employment and educational status of the Hispanic teenage father?

What proportion of Hispanic teenage mothers who were married when their child was born eventually graduate from high school? Is the high school completion rate different for unmarried teenage mothers?

What proportion of teenage mothers become welfare-dependent, and what factors seem to be most important in determining such dependency? Is education a major factor?

In sum, despite the burgeoning interest in the health and social status of adolescent parents and the recent national concern about the consequences of pregnancy among U.S. teenagers, very little is known about the socioeconomic correlates and impact of Hispanic teenage pregnancy and parenthood. The need for appropriate research and analysis is acute, given the growth and the disadvantaged status of the Hispanic population in the United States. More information about the precise nature and extent of teenage pregnancy and the socioeconomic and health factors related to it must be obtained, analyzed and made available to Hispanic community leaders and residents as well as policy makers. Such analysis is essential because appropriate action is urgently needed at all levels to address what is clearly a serious and growing challenge to the future of the Hispanic community.

SOURCES

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